

Patience with the Lamp Lit
by Rev. Doug McCusker

Happy Holidays! This year, I have learned the true meaning of that beautiful salutation. For me, Happy Holidays is not a substitute phrase meant to avoid offense or wage war on Christmas. It is a recognition that the holy comes in many packages. I have enjoyed partnering with congregants to share with you the diverse traditions that honor the holy at this time of year. We have been careful not to misappropriate the stories of other religions while celebrating the sacred thread that is woven in our Unitarian Universalist faith.

These past 3 weeks we have heard the story of Muhammed's vision, Mary's conception, and the Buddha's enlightenment. Last week we re-enacted the story of the birth of the Messiah. Today, we lit the menorah and told the story of the oil that lasted for 8 days. The common theme throughout this Holiday season has been the possibility of miracles. Told in different ways, influenced by different cultures, the resounding message has been that Divinity and Humanity are intertwined. These stories are about the ultimate and intimate relationship of God with Humans.

From time to time, the veil of separation parts and humanity is filled with the grace of God to light the way forward. One need not pray to the same God or even believe in a God that intervenes in history to grasp the significance of these miracles. They point to the mysterious and the inexplicable resilience of the human will to find a greater love that binds us together even in times of evil and extreme suffering. All these characters, Muhammed, Siddhartha, Mary, Jesus and Judas Maccabee are archetypes of the hope in humanity that drives us forward. That no matter how terrible we can be with one another, that there is a season of renewal and redemption for us all.

It is no coincidence that all these traditions and cultures celebrate these Holidays this time of year. They are following the cue of the ancient, primeval religions that celebrated the most profound miracle of all – Life. Set against the backdrop of the coming of cold weather and long nights, winter solstice is a deeply spiritual reminder of the value of patience and stillness. In all the holiday stories of this season, we are told to listen with open hearts for the renewal of the human spirit.

Our story today took place during a civil conflict between warring factions in Judea. At the center of the struggle was the socio-economic schism caused by a widening division of the rich and the poor, the powerful elites and the common folk, the priests and the laity. It was a time of great upheaval between the new and the old. Buddha's enlightenment, Mohammed's vision and Jesus' birth all occurred during similar historical moments of division. It is tempting to think that we are in such a period now. It is during these times of conflict that we see the good, bad and ugly aspects of the human condition. But even in the most tumultuous times, the seeds of renewal are planted. Prophets, saints, messiahs and bodhisattvas are reminders that we are not out here in the world alone, thrashing about with no inner light to illuminate our way in love.

Humans do all kinds of destructive things to each other and to this planet, but deep down we are of this earth. We are connected in mysterious ways to the miracle of creation, which never stops. The turning of the earth away from the sun brings darkness and frigid cold. And nestled within the soil is the germ of new life. In the dead of winter, life abounds, calling us to renew our bonds with each other, and with the creator.

Holidays are holy days not because of the rituals that we practice, but because of the meaning behind them. Whether we light a menorah, or a chalice, or a yule log we are shining the light of truth and understanding. We share feasts of food and spirits to honor the bounty that sustains us. We decorate our homes with evergreens to symbolize eternal life of which we are a part. We sing songs and tell stories of our ancestors to remember that we are all part of a continuum, connected through space and time. We exchange gifts and do good deeds because we know deep down that we are enriched through generosity. Just as the creator has given us life, we possess the ability to give love.

The winter holidays are a special time of year for me because of their spiritual serenity. We blacked out the windows and turned down the lights to recreate a sense of peace and stillness that comes with winter. I decided that turning down the heat might be a bit much. Winter is a season, but it is also a state of mind. A pause in the hustle and bustle of frenetic activity.

We all sleep because our bodies need to rest and conserve energy. It is an ancient rhythm tied to the spinning of our planet. Animals hibernate and slow down their heart rates. I'm sure there was a time when humans did the same thing. Today, we can fool ourselves into thinking that we never need to slow down. For some folks, the holidays are the busiest time of year. But not today, not here. At least for this hour, let us simply be connected in communion with the Spirit of Life.

Let us celebrate the ritual of winter inside our bodies and our minds. The light we need is always with us even if we were to completely darken this room. Just like the oil that lasted for 8 days, we possess a life sustaining fuel that feeds our inner light. The Buddha said, "just as a candle cannot burn without fire, men cannot live without a spiritual life." He wasn't referring to religious practices or regimented thinking. I believe that he was talking about that inner light which connects us to the fullness of the universe instead of the smallness of our egos.

Meditation, prayer, singing, dancing, laughing, loving, these are ways that we experience the Spirit of Life. Making money, achieving success, and exercising power may feel like bright light and summer all the time. But even the rich and powerful need a little winter in their lives. A time when they can flow with life rather than constantly doing battle with it. Winter is a reminder that everyone needs downtime to renew their inner light.

On the weekend of November 11, I had the Sunday off because Dr. Farnsworth was here to talk to you about the Virginia elections. As you know, September and October around here were full of ceremonies, special events on top of the usual busyness of congregational life. As much as I love politics, I had to take some time to chill. Literally! Marie and I decided to travel up north to Massachusetts to see our daughter, Bree and to attend a weekend retreat at the Rowe Center. The workshop was called Mindful Tracking. And it coincided with the first cold snap of the season.

There we were, tracking animals in the forest in 20-degree weather. Pretty crazy right? The class was called mindful tracking because observation is a connection of both our internal and external awareness. All our sensory observations are processed in our minds and filtered through assumptions and past experiences, which influences our judgment. To be a good tracker, we need to be aware of our inner selves as much as our outer environment.

There were about 20 of us in the class along with the two instructors, both of whom were very experienced animal trackers. One of them was like a Zen master. None of his questions or answers were straight forward. He taught us to consider the whole picture before drawing any conclusions about a specific piece of evidence. If we come up with a hypothesis, we need to hold it lightly until we receive additional information. Too often, we get enamored with our theories and we fail to see the obvious when it doesn't fit into our story. This applies not just to animal tracking, but also to just about any problem solving.

Because it was so cold, we didn't see any animals the whole time we were out in the woods. Plus, I'm sure that with 22 humans tromping around loudly and smelling the place up with our scent the animals steered clear of us. There wasn't any snow on the ground, so we didn't have the benefit of actual tracks except for the deer who left their impressions in the leaves. And yet, it was obvious that the place was teeming with life.

After a while, I began to see how the interconnections of the trees, vegetation, and terrain, gave us clues about who was sharing the woods with us. That and the scat left on the trails. You should have seen us. Every time we found some poop, we all got down on our knees and examined it like a jeweler appraising a ring. We poked at it with sticks to see what the animal had digested. All very important clues since animals have very specific diets. And yes, we had to sniff it to learn what different animal poops smell like. I can tell you that a red fox's poop smells different than a brown fox's. But I digress.

The instructors taught us to discern marks on trees, holes in the ground and ways that vegetation was chewed. All these things mean something. I share this with you because before that workshop, whenever I walked into the woods, I was oblivious to all those signs of life. They were there telling a story, but I didn't know the language. Now, my field of view has been expanded simply because I am aware of that which was previously hidden.

Winter is the best time to go tracking because the chaos of life in the summer is too loud, too plentiful. My mind is too easily distracted with the flowers and the bird songs to notice the subtle traces left behind by small animals. The bare trees of winter and the angle of the sun cast the light on different places of the forest floor. And so it is with our inner landscapes. We need the solitude of winter to quiet our distracted minds, so we can get in touch once again with our spiritual core.

Nestled deep within us like the seeds of the spring flowers, is our source of connection with the creator and the created. Even in the harshest of winters, we possess an inner font of love and belonging. It is always there even when we are afraid or lonely.

The Holidays are a time to nurture that inner light which shines within all of us and refuses to go out. A time to connect with our loved ones and with those who are alone. To give of ourselves and to make sure that no one goes hungry. Beneath all the rituals and traditions, and the miraculous stories is a message of hope and renewal of the human spirit. May you find joy in the coming days and may the turning of the light bring you peace. Happy Holidays.